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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000422

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ AS HE SEES HIMSELF - THE REVOLUTIONARY
BATTLING THE EMPIRE

REF: A. CARACAS 000355

[1](#)B. CARACAS 000367

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: President Chavez claims that he wants to improve relations with the new U.S. administration (Reftel), but his intolerance for what he perceives as criticism and his radical worldview continue to pose major hurdles to bettering bilateral relations. His perennial (mis)treatment of the United States appears to stem largely from his demand for unconditional "respect" and his desire to be recognized as an important "revolutionary" Latin American leader. It also draws on his resentment at his visa denial resulting from his 1992 coup attempt and his perception that the US was witting, if not complicit, in the 2002 attempted coup against him. His stance also is part and parcel of his trademark political strategy of creating conflict to rally his supporters against domestic and foreign "enemies." While the USG will never be able to satisfy the Venezuelan president's outsized ego, we will continue to work to establish normal relations with Venezuela, featuring an end to harassment of Embassy operations in Caracas and improved communication on routine matters. End Summary.

THIN SKIN

[1](#)2. (C) President Chavez enjoys full control over all branches of the Venezuelan government. He also fosters a personality cult requiring adulation from cabinet members to his grassroots supporters. Despite his overwhelming executive power, Chavez remains hypersensitive to any opposition, particularly perceived criticism from the United States. The Venezuelan president is quick to react to criticism with irrational counterarguments and name-calling, often seeking to portray himself as the recipient of unprovoked, groundless attacks from Washington. He and other senior Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) leaders scrupulously avoiding engaging on the substance of domestic or foreign criticism, and instead try to discredit the messenger.

[1](#)3. (C) One of Chavez's most frequent rhetorical demands is for "respect," for him personally and his government. For example, after calling President Obama a "poor ignorant man" during his March 22 weekly "Alo, Presidente" TV broadcast (Reftel), Chavez nevertheless said, "if Obama respects us, we

will respect him. If he tries to continue to disrespect Venezuela, we will confront the American empire in whatever terrain." Chavez also tries to reframe US criticism, which is frequently picked up and amplified by local opposition-oriented media, as a "sovereignty" issue. Using the "respect" angle in that way plays to the nationalism among Chavez's poor supporters. For example, Chavez recently claimed to be outraged by the Department's 2009 Human Rights Report and International Narcotics Strategy Control Report (INCSR) which he characterized as personal attacks by President Obama and Secretary Clinton, although the findings of these annual reports should hardly have come as a surprise.

WORLD LEADER WANNABE

14. (C) Chavez travels extensively and doles out substantial foreign assistance in an effort to achieve international status as Latin America's foremost leader. He jealously guards his exaggerated self-perception, and reacts negatively to other Latin American countries' receptivity to USG initiatives and USG attention focused on other Latin American heads-of-state. Chavez, for example, conducted his own "shadow" tour when then President Bush visited several Latin American countries in 2007. More recently, he insisted that he did not need Brazilian President Lula to broker improved Venezuelan relations with the new U.S. Administration, but he nevertheless gave Lula "permission" to discuss Venezuela during Lula's recent call on President Obama.

15. (C) Chavez also seeks to be perceived internationally as a world spokesperson for the "downtrodden." He has specifically chosen to form odd alliances in order to both raise his personal profile and burnish his "revolutionary"

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credentials. In forging close ties with Cuba, Chavez has been trying to position himself internationally as Castro's heir. The Venezuelan president has also deliberately forged alliances to counter US influence in the region, including with China, Iran, Sudan and Russia, ostensibly to foster a more "multi-polar" world. Chavez's anti-American dogmatism also leads him to embrace far-flung authoritarian regimes, such as Belarus, Syria, and Zimbabwe. Under the rubric of his ALBA initiative, Chavez contends that Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Dominica constitute a single "Bolivarian" bloc. Chavez has convoked an ALBA Summit in Caracas immediately preceding the Summit of the Americas, where he will likely try to enlist the other presidents attending to be more antagonistic towards the USG during the Summit of the Americas.

DAVID, NOT GOLIATH

16. (C) Although he wields almost complete control over state resources and institutions, Chavez rallies his base by exaggerating and sometimes fabricating internal and external threats. More specifically, Chavez deliberately creates conflict with perceived "enemies," depicting himself as the underdog fighting for the Venezuelan people against the U.S. "empire" and its lackeys ("pitiyanquis"). Chavez has framed his many successful electoral campaigns on this simplistic formula. Moreover, Chavez sees himself as someone who has survived perceived attempts against his government, his person and his life by the United States Government. Thus, by extension, he regularly blames the United States, however implausibly, for domestic woes, from shortages to basic food staples to high crime rates.

17. (C) Chavez picks public fights with other countries, not just the United States. In recent years, he has temporarily severed diplomatic ties at the ambassadorial level with

Colombia, Peru, and Mexico. He dispatched troops to the Colombian border in 2007 in the wake of the Colombian attack on the Raul Reyes camp along the Ecuadorian border with Colombia before reversing course and improving bilateral ties with President Uribe. He expelled all Israeli diplomats after Israel intervened in Gaza. Some of his supporters are urging Chavez to expel the Papal Nuncio for granting refuge to an opposition student leader in the Holy See Mission. Chavez's ongoing enmity with the United States, however, attracts a great deal more domestic and international attention than his spats with other countries.

OVER HERE

18. (C) A number of local pundits argue that Chavez wants U.S. attention most of all. They argue that Chavez purposely makes provocative and insulting statements about U.S. officials in an effort to elicit responses from senior USG officials. The Venezuelan president uses any running public dispute with the USG to try to elevate his international stature. But there is also a personal element to his antics rooted in his own insecurities and his ambition to be accepted as a world leader. At multilateral fora, Chavez inevitably tries to become the center of attention, prompting even the Spanish King to exclaim "Why don't you shut up?" when the Venezuelan president would not stop heckling the Spanish Prime Minister during the 2007 Inter-American Summit. We expect Chavez to seek center stage at the Summit of The Americas and to be jealous of the attention paid to President Obama by other leaders and the media.
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